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# Pride Parades and/or Prayer Processions: Contested Public Space in Serbia #Belgrade Pride 2014

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## Abstract

In post-Yugoslav countries, national identity seems to be increasingly defined by the formulation of a traditional discourse on sexuality and gender, culminating in a growing interference of religious institutions with national debates and policies on LGBT-rights. In this paper we aim to gain more insight into the discursive effects of such sexual nationalist discourse by exploring responses of the Serbian Orthodox Church to the 2014 Belgrade Pride parade. Drawing from theories on religious and sexual nationalism and queer geography, we will argue that while the Serbian Orthodox discourse on homosexuality is becoming more secular, this secularization of public speech is compensated by a strategy of reclaiming the streets of Belgrade through politically charged public religious ritual. As the church is in this way making its anti-LGBT attitude physical and visible, Serbian citizens are increasingly requested to agree to Church teachings on sexuality and gender as a prerequisite for religious participation, resulting in an increasing divide between those “within” and “without” the community of Orthodox Serbs.

## Keywords

religio-sexual nationalism – public space – Gay Pride Parade – prayer procession – Serbian Orthodox Church – LGBT

## 1 Introduction

This article examines whether and how the oppositional pairing of religion and sexual diversity is contested in public space in Serbia. These ‘cultural oppositional pairings and negotiations’ can be traced well through the responses to civil rights activists’ efforts to organize Gay Pride Parades since 2001. Several parades in Serbia were interrupted by violent attacks by ultranationalist groups and football hooligans (e.g. Belgrade Pride in 2001 is now remembered as the ‘massacre pride’) or forbidden for fear of violence. Meanwhile, the Serbian Orthodox Church’s strong media opposition towards homosexuality indirectly provided legitimization for these violent responses (Jovanović 2011; Sremac et al., 2015). Members of ultranationalist groups have made far-reaching claims about the nature of Serbian identity, moral order and the ‘true’ Serbian nation, and called for tumbling of the current government and a clear anti-EU stance (Pavasović Trošt & Kovačević 2013). Serbian nationalist discourses represent homosexuality as a considerable Western threat to the traditional values of national and religious identity. Anti-Westernism is propagated and topics like sexual emancipation are viewed as “imposed by the decadent West” (Tucić 2011, 45). Radical nationalist groups repudiate the European Union for having “dubious and ludicrous moral standards” and being “a true danger to tradition” (Spencer-Dohner 2008). The adoption of sexual minority policies is framed as the “international gay lobby’s” attack on national identity (Slootmaeckers & Touquet 2013). Similar discursive framing of homosexuality as a Western conspiracy may be observed in Russia and other Central and Eastern European countries. Understanding the construction of religion and homosexuality in Serbia therefore needs to be understood against the backdrop of social and political confusion, nationalism, anti-Western sentiment and rhetoric. The theoretical framework of our study lies in the focus on the intersection of three conflicting dimensions of constantly evolving identities: religion, sexuality, and nationalism. These identities are played out in relation to each other. Conflicts about religion and homosexuality thus not only show shifts and tensions in changing public perceptions of homosexuality, but also of religion and of national identity. It is only very recently that scholars are trying to gain a better understanding of the issue (cf. Jovanović, 2013; Sremac & Ganzevoort, 2015).

## 2 Theoretical and Methodological Framework: Religio-Sexual Nationalism

### 2.1 *Theoretical Framework*

Our article brings together a number of theoretical contexts related to the study of religion, politics, and sexuality. In the academic literature the conceptual frame of sexual nationalism (or homonationalism<sup>1</sup>) is often understood in terms of the integration of homosexuality (or what has been called 'sexual citizenship') into the Western nation-state building, thus promoting progressive rhetoric and politics on sexuality as well as 'pro-gay' discourse as part of the national and cultural identity configuration (Ahmed 2006; Dickinson 1999; Dudink 2011; El-Tayeb 2011; Geyer & Lehmann 2004; Hayes 2000; Kuntsman and Esperanza 2008; Mosse 1985; Kulpa 2013; Puar 2007; Parker et al. 1992; Sabsay 2012; Stychin 1997; Walker 1996). We, however, use the term sexual nationalism in a broader sense to include every perspective that links nationalism with sexuality. Both in 'pro-gay' rhetoric of Western sexual citizenship and in 'anti-gay' discursive practices in Serbia, the role of the state is invoked to regulate sexuality through restrictive politics (pro or anti-gay discursive regimes) in the process of justifying national self-determination. Similarly, religious nationalism refers to nationalist discourses and practices that use and regulate specific views on and practices of religion (Aburaiya 2009; Abazović 2010; Arjomand 1994; Barker 2009; Brubaker 2012; Fukase-Indergaard & Indergaard 2008; Grigoriadis 2013; Geyer & Lehmann 2004; Leustean 2008; Juergensmeyer 2006, 2008; Smith 2003; Friedland 2002; 2011). Sremac and Ganzevoort (2015) argue that religio-sexual nationalisms are organized around erotic discourse, heteronormativity, patriarchal (often militarized) masculinity, heterosexual hegemony and the gendered order of society. Religio-sexual nationalisms, therefore, produce gender norms that are instrumental in political legitimization strategies and played out in the public space.

In this article we focus on the interplay between religious and sexual nationalism in public space, in particular the contested space of the city centre of Belgrade during the Gay Pride in 2014. In Belgrade, each year that the Pride Parade is announced the question immediately rises whether it will in fact happen or whether it will be cancelled. The local government may, even until the day before the parade, decide to call it off. In the weeks leading up to the parade, newspapers are filled with discussions on whether or not it should

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1 For Puar (2013, 337) the conceptual framework of homonationalism is "a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality."

be allowed. The struggle over what may or may not happen on the streets of Belgrade on the day of the parade is, we argue, symbolic for an ongoing struggle that marks these streets for the remaining 364 days of the year. Insights from queer geography help us understand the particular role of space in the struggle over sexual citizenship. As geography took to heart one of post-structuralism's most basic insights, namely that gendered and sexualized identities are not a given reality but rather a construct that comes into being through the repetition of cultural norms (Hubbard 2001, Skeggs et al. 2004, Bell and Valentine 1995, see also Butler 1990, 1993), it has over the past decades changed its perspective on space. Like human subjects, spaces may appear to us "natural" and self-evident, while this perception is in fact the result of many discursive and aesthetic investments. Queer geography has shown on many occasions that these investments have often been gendered, sexualized and heteronormative (Elder 1998; Brown & Knopp 2003). Within this body of work, often focused on urban spaces, it has been made clear that city-spaces are sexually marked in a variety of ways, for instance through "gay neighborhoods", "homophobic areas", red light districts or gay cruising areas. In this marking of the public space, public events like Gay Prides form a particular case. As Gill Valentine (2003) has pointed out, Prides are often perceived as a "collective coming out". During Pride events, LGBT people become visible not as individuals but as a community that not only claims citizenship rights, but also claims to leave its own mark on the public space, questioning its self-evident yet often violently enforced heterosexuality (Weeks 1998). Careful analyses in queer geography have further provided insights into these claims and shown that they are to be understood in a wider context of class, gender, ethnicity and regionality (Longhurst 2008). Gay neighborhoods may be a western phenomenon and moreover available only to those who can afford to live in them (Rushbrook 2002), queer events or organisations may re-enforce gendered norms (Nash & Baine 2007), and moreover be de-politicized and claimed as a hallmark for the cosmopolitan stance of the city in question (Bell & Binnie 2004; Stella 2013). We suggest that religio-sexual and nationalist discourses on homosexuality need to be understood in the context of this complex ideological struggle over the perception of the city, in this case Belgrade. Moreover, in this article we would like to show how the linguistic/discursive and the physical/spatial dimension of religious and sexual nationalism are inextricably intertwined. Imbuing spaces with meaning is both a matter of public speech and of the presence (or absence) of bodies, symbols, buildings and rituals.

## 2.2 *Corpora*

The first part of our case study consists of an analysis of public discourse on the Pride Parade of 2014. Defining what exactly the 'public discourse' of the

Serbian Orthodox Church is in relation to LGBT issues and the Pride Parades is complicated. According to Serbian Orthodox doctrine only the Synod as a whole can issue public statements which represent the Church. If we were to follow this claim, there has only ever been one single statement of the Church with regard to LGBT issues, in which homosexuality as well as homophobic violence are condemned (Irinej Bački 2010). The public perception of the Church's opinion, however, differs greatly from this official position and has been formed by the many other statements issued over the years by its individual representatives — which the Church has never refuted. For the purposes of this article, the public discourse of the Serbian Orthodox Church is understood to be observable in: 1. different media under the direct control of the Church's institutional hierarchy and 2. statements by official Church dignitaries, as mediated by the mainstream media. Our qualitative analysis of the public discourse of the Church with regard to LGBT issues and the Pride Parade in 2014 will therefore encompass the following corpora:

1. A selection of Church-controlled print media (*Pravoslavljje, Svetigora, Glasnik, Pravoslavni misionar, Svetosavsko zvonce*)<sup>2</sup> for the period encompassing two weeks prior to the Pride Parade and 2 weeks following it; and a selection of other texts produced by the Church for specific potentially significant dates (in chronological order: the Christmas Encyclical 2013, *Sabornik*<sup>3</sup> for September 28, The Easter Encyclical 2014, Patriarch Irinej's statement before the Pride Parade, and the Christmas Encyclical 2015).
2. A selection of mainstream daily print media (*Blic, Danas, Informer, Kurir, Politika*)<sup>4</sup> for the period encompassing two weeks prior to the Pride Parade and 2 weeks following it since the debate is at its peak, most covered in the media and all the actors come together and interact with each other; and a selection of other texts appearing in the daily print and electronic media for specific dates which occasion it (namely, statements by Patriarch Irinej and Metropolitan Amfilohije reported by Blic in May 2014). Furthermore, the analysis will focus on the discourses that characterize the most representative debates on religious and sexual nationalism.

As will become clear below, official Church media — with the notable exception of the Patriarch's statement — mostly practiced the politics of silence

2 *Orthodoxy, Holy Mount, The Tribune, The Orthodox Missionary, The Bell of St. Sava.*

3 *The Cathedral Bulletin.*

4 *Flash, Today, Informer, Courier, Politics.*

with regard to the issues of the Pride Parade in 2014. This is in contrast with, for example, the year 2009, when *Pravoslavlj*e had a series of texts on the topic of homosexuality. Mainstream dailies provide more material for analysis of this year's discourse and will therefore be cited here more extensively, along with articles from previous years which help provide historical context.

In the next section we will first discuss the attitude of the Serbian Orthodox Church towards homosexuality in the recent history prior to the year 2014. This brief overview will help us detect recent changes in discourse and strategy on the part of the church. We will then move to our case study of the 2014 Pride Parade, which consists of two parts. In the first part we discuss the debate on the Pride at the level of public discourse. The second part focuses on public space and discusses the role of public prayer and prayer processions. We will then conclude with some final remarks.

### 3 'Us and Them': Shaping the Public Discourse of the Serbian Orthodox Church

Homosexuality was decriminalized in Serbia in 1994 and Orthodoxy — having arguably suffered a form of persecution under Communism — has experienced a revival during the ethnically motivated wars in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990s. It was not before the fall of Milošević's regime in October 2000, however, that both the Church (seen by many as the keeper of traditional authentically Serbian values) and the LGBT activist community (seen by many as the harbinger of the so-called "Western" values of individual freedoms and human rights) felt it possible to begin contending for public space. Interestingly enough, various debates surrounding both of these public presences have questioned their right to public space, as both (homo)sexuality and religion have historically (at best) been relegated to the *private* domain. Both communities historically othered by the state and society can now arguably be seen othering each other — the Church inordinately more so.

The struggle over public representation of religion and homosexuality became very visible in the year 2001, which ironically enough was a landmark year in Serbia both for the Serbian Orthodox Church and LGBT communities, whose histories have since been inextricable. In 2001, religious education was incorporated into the public school system for the first time after World War II. This development opened up space for the Church to enter the public institutions, and thus, according to Drezgić, "marked a transition from 'instrumental pious nationalism' to 'religious nationalism' in Serbia" (Drezgić 2015, 1). Religious education was instituted as a facultative subject. The alternative



subject, entitled “civil education”, was envisaged as its secular counterpart. In terms of values and morality it was usually attributed to European civic democracies and as such associated in the public mind with joining the EU. Religious education (“veronauka”) was thus from the start juxtaposed to this “Euroscience” (“evronauka”) (Bačević 2005). It is also in 2001 that the first Pride Parade was attempted in Belgrade. However, the slogan “There is Room for Everyone” under which it was organized proved tragically unbecoming when it was violently attacked by right-wing groups and football hooligans, and many of its participants were badly beaten.

The Serbian Church, as has been noted, “consistently constructs homosexuals as ‘constitutive outside’ and/or ‘external enemies’ of the nation — as the nation’s Other” (Van den Berg et al. 2014, 129). As the Church discourse has of late in effect been shaped in opposition to the discourse of human rights and democratic freedoms, associated with the accession to the EU — having itself been othered by international leftist discourse during Communism — it now lays claim to ‘traditional Serbian values’ which it interprets as the centering of all that is patriarchal and ethnic. Consequently, the public discourse of the Serbian Orthodox Church focuses on ethnicity (as many Serbs as possible controlling as much territory as possible), proper gender roles (which evidently advance the previous goal), and exclusion of the Other (anyone who would impede the previous two goals) — all hallmarks of religious nationalism (Sremac & Ganzevoort 2015; Drezgić 2015). This discourse of religious nationalism, accentuating these three points, is readily observable in the vast majority of the Church’s positions — as reported in the media — on issues of general public interest such as Kosovo, abortion, and Gay Pride Parades.

What is less readily observable is ‘purely’ religious discourse. Drezgić notes that the Church’s position on abortion presents abortion as mostly a demographic problem (of declining birth rates), rather than a theological issue related to, for instance, the sanctity of life (Drezgić 2015). This preference for secular rather than religious argumentation is applicable to other parts of the public discourse of the Church as well, especially that devoted to Pride Parades. Less focused on ethical, doctrinal, and spiritual facets of abortions and practiced homosexual relations within Christian theology, Church publications on these issues are instead stressing the imagined instrumental effect of recalcitrant women and homosexuals on birth rates. The dominant theme of these statements appears to be the importance of increasing the number of ethnic Serbs and thus strengthening the Serbian nation state. Not surprisingly, the ideology of pro-natalism in particular serves to connect the Church discourse of Pride Parades to the discourse on abortion, often explicitly. Metropolitan Amfilohije’s notorious statement issued before the subsequently banned 2009 Pride parade makes an explicit connection between



abortion and homosexuality as unnatural refusals to “bring forth good fruit” — in this particular interpretation of Matthew 3:9, apparently taken to refer literally to procreation (Amfilohije 2009). In 2013, Patriarch Irinej, asked about his position on the impending (and later banned) Pride Parade, said for the daily *Politika* that “[n]othing is as endangered in these tragic times we live in as marriage and the family. Both marriage and the family are being destroyed intentionally, especially by way of the gay parade”. The Patriarch added that the last thing the Serbian people would need to finally disappear off the face of the earth would be for this “plague” to befall us and that something should be done instead to counter the falling birth rates (*Politika* 2013). The official site of the Belgrade Cathedral has an entire subsection dedicated to the abortion issue, which squarely blames the demographic situation in Serbia on collapsing traditional gender roles, which apparently include the emancipation of women and “homosexuality” [sic].<sup>5</sup>

Church statements on demographic and ethnic issues, in particular when related to LGBT issues, can be read as an attempt to directly intervene in state affairs. For instance: prompted by Dveri, a right-wing movement with Church ties which had by then already transformed into a registered political party (itself a sign of the times), Patriarch Irinej requested that the government ban not only the Pride Parade, but also the Swedish photographer Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin's *Ecce Homo* exhibition (Irinej 2012). The exhibition, which shows Jesus Christ among LGBT people and according to certain interpretations also as himself gay, was at that time held within the four walls of the Belgrade Center for Cultural Decontamination. Prime Minister Dačić supported the Patriarch's position and expressed dismay at the fact that it is indeed not an official crime in Serbia to offend the religious beliefs of the dominant group (*Blic* 4.10.2012).<sup>6</sup> In return, those opposing conservative Church statements have attempted to counter such interference with politics and governance, often from a human rights perspective. Much public attention has been paid to Amfilohije's 2009 statement, mentioned above, which by some was understood as a violent threat. In this instance, the Ombudsman for gender equality issued the recommendation that the Metropolitan apologize to the LGBT community. The recommendation was not accepted by the Metropolitan and the struggles over public statements and Pride events seem to have set a precedent for the Church's incursion into state affairs, which has culminated in its interference with the 2014 Gay Pride, our case study to which we will now turn.

5 Anti-gay discourse in Serbia tends to use the word “homosexuality” to refer to what is perceived as an ideological movement constantly striving to recruit new adherents.

6 See Valić-Nedeljković, Ganzevoort and Sremac (forthcoming).

#### 4 Part One — Public Discourse of the Church

With regard to the Pride Parade and LGBT issues, the official print media of the Church have largely responded with a sonorous silence (Jovanović, 2013) — in stark contrast with previous years. When dignitaries of the Church did decide to offer opinions, “traditional”/Biblical depictions of homosexuality (sulphurous pits, fire and brimstone, Sodom and Gomorrah, being hewn and cast into the fire) were noticeably far less pronounced in their discourse than they had been before. This caused some analysts in the media to declare that the Church has moderated its position (*Blic* 26.9.2014). As has been noted here, however, traditional imagery still belonged to religious discourse, whereas novel interference with those not belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church became apparent in disturbing ways, especially in May and September.

In May, disastrous floods devastated Serbia, causing loss of lives and extensive material damages. It was during this difficult time for a large portion of Serbia's citizens that they were informed that the catastrophe had been caused by their approval of Conchita Wurst or their acceptance of the Pride Parade. Metropolitan Amfilohije stated that the “woman with the beard” Conchita Wurst, recent winner of the Eurovision Song Contest in her feminine performance persona, was being “affirmed like Jesus” in these parts and that the floods were God's way of returning us to the path of righteousness (*Blic* 19.5.2014). Patriarch Irinej, on the other hand, blamed the floods on the Pride Parade — originally planned for May and deferred on account of the floods — which wickedly propagated “dignity and democracy, and all against God and the laws of life” (*Blic* 15.5.2014).

Just as it seemed that the tensions had subsided and that the Church would venture no public opinions with regard to the Pride Parade, the Patriarch personally signed a statement on it in September. The public opinion was awake with the shocking parallel it featured between homosexuality, on the one hand, and pedophilia and incest on the other, but perhaps a more striking development was that the Patriarch assumed a position of secular authority. A prominent portion of the statement consisted of a definitive and authoritative assertion that those taxpaying citizens of Serbia who also happened to be LGBT activists organizing the Parade had no right to burden the “entire state apparatus” and cause the state significant material expenses in order to secure their safety from violence: “one thing is certain: you have the right to parade, but only at your own expense and the expense of those giving you orders<sup>7</sup> [...] not at the expense of Serbia” (Irinej 2014).

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7 This is probably meant to refer to the EU or the US — the outside Other instructing and commanding the Other within.

In his article entitled “The False Narrative of Pride”, published in *Sabornik*, bulletin of the Belgrade Cathedral on the day of the Parade, deacon Nenad Ilić contends that the “Pride” Parade is a calculated attack on *national* pride, and that the rainbow flag, symbolizing the LGBT community worldwide, is problematic mostly because it “defies” nations (Ilić 2014). The sermon held on the day of the Pride parade at the Belgrade Cathedral by a priest who had not been allowed to pass through a police cordon securing the parade included the lament that “even Albanians and KFOR”<sup>8</sup> in Kosovo were known to show respect to Serbian Orthodox priests, whereas we were now living under a state of occupation — in the middle of Serbia.<sup>9</sup>

In the light of church interference with the Pride Parade, what was the discourse of LGBT activists on the Church? Banners carried by participants in the Parade (*Blic* 28.9.2014) — featuring pictures of Patriarch Irinej and Metropolitan Amfilohije alongside popular song lyrics which implied, in context, their (latent) homosexuality or desirability to males — could demonstrate that the battle for public space has been taken up by the “other side” as well.<sup>10</sup> This was the first time that LGBT activists had mentioned the Church or its dignitaries. Admittedly, the media accentuated this rift. In other footage, available on YouTube, Adam Puškar, one of the organizers of the Parade, can be seen attempting to dissuade the young participants from using the banners, after which an unidentified person is seen breaking them. Boban Stojanović, activist and organizer of the Parade, repeatedly refused to comment on the Patriarch’s statement, claiming he was “too small” to reply to the head of the Church. The LGBT movement in Serbia seems reluctant to directly address the Church, and even if it does, it is done only by a small minority or even merely in individual cases.

Secularists — both theists and non-theists — have long embraced Jesus’ admonishment to “[r]ender therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar’s, and unto God the things which be God’s. (Luke 20:25) It is customarily interpreted as advice to leave matters of the state to the state without rebelling unnecessarily against secular governments, while simultaneously not forgetting one’s religious duties to God. The increasingly secular discourse observable in the statements made by Church dignitaries in 2014 can be interpreted as

8 The Kosovo Force (KFOR) is a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation-led international peace-keeping force which has operated in Kosovo since the territory came under NATO control. Both NATO and KFOR carry strong negative resonances for many Serbs.

9 Source: observation made during personal presence at said Liturgy at said church.

10 Valerie Sperling (2015, 2) in her book *Sex, Politics, & Putin* shows how pro-and anti-regime activists in Russia used similar concepts of femininity, masculinity, and homophobia as strategies for political legitimacy and propagandistic performativity.

refusing to render unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, perhaps marking the beginning of an ongoing process of increasing church interference with state policy on LGBT rights.

## 5 Part Two — Claiming the Public Space

Public discourse of the Church does not only encompass the words of its dignitaries, but also their actions, when these are performed in the public eye. The year 2014 introduced a novel strategy into the discourse of the Serbian Orthodox Church with regard to both public issues of import to religio-sexual nationalism: abortion and the Pride Parade. This strategy could be termed 'political public prayer' and included in 2014 two instances of politically motivated prayer processions performed in the public space.<sup>11</sup>

The first and less widely reported of the two was organized to demand a legal ban on abortion. On April 7, after the Liturgy commemorating the feast of Annunciation, starting from the Belgrade Cathedral, the prayer procession made its way to the Parliament, where a prayer was said and banners were held. Organized by 1389, a nationalistic right-wing group, it was only tacitly supported by the clergy. When it was repeated in 2015, it was with a "conditional blessing" from the Patriarch this time (the condition being that no violence should take place). Apparently striving to become an annual event, this prayer procession is receiving increasing support from within the Church.

The second politically motivated prayer procession to take place in 2014 — more immediately relevant to our topic and of more interest to the mainstream media — was organized on September 28, only hours after the successful Gay Pride Parade had ended and in direct protest that it had been allowed. Organized by Dveri, as mentioned a nationalistic right-wing political party, it was promoted as an "all-national procession celebrating the sanctity of life, marriage and birth" and received open support from the clergy. Commencing in St. Sava's Temple, the prayer procession followed the route that the Pride Parade had passed. In order to 'purge' the city of the Parade, the participating priests reportedly used censers throughout the route. That the streets of Belgrade needed to be "cleansed" of homosexuality becomes even more evident when we look at the way in which the concept of "parade" was

11 The precedent for political public prayer was set in May 2013 when, after the Brussels Agreement was signed by Serbian officials, a demonstration was organized to protest what was seen as a betrayal of Serbian interests in Kosovo. Metropolitan Amfilohije saw fit at this protest to perform a public prayer for the dead — for the Government of Serbia.

present in the media in the period of the Pride Parade. Apart from the prayer procession a grandiose military *parade* was announced in honor of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Both the procession organized by the state and the military parade came to dominate the use of the word “parade” in the media in this period. It seemed as though Church and state were cooperating in quickly re-marking the streets as religious, heterosexual and masculine. For this paper, we will focus on the discursive effects of prayer processions.

Though they are obviously an incursion of the Church into matters of the state, the question that must first be asked is: are these prayer processions even sacral to begin with — or secular? Protesting existing legal liberties of the secular state (the constitutional right to gather freely in public space and the legal right to abortion), demanding that they be revoked and invoking the power of the state to instead discipline and punish the unruly behavior of LGBT individuals and women, it could be said that these ‘prayer processions’ are in effect disguised demonstrations, merely invested with the aura of a holy rite.

To understand fully the meaning that this new strategy holds within the discourse of religio-sexual nationalism that the Church is seen employing, it might be helpful to examine the traditional symbolism of prayer processions in Serbia. This symbolism, as Todorović notes, is a result of the merging of two historical layers of meaning:

1. In Christian (and specifically in the Eastern Orthodox Church) symbolism, the procession is seen as coming from *within* the holy space of the church and then ritually reordering nature and the entire Cosmos. An important aspect of it is its community-building function — this is a rite that is customary for even otherwise non-churchgoers to attend.
2. In pre-Christian symbolism, however, it was the holy places *outside* — such as cemeteries and sanctified oak trees — that were visited during the procession. The community-building function was even more pronounced in pre-Christian times, as these processions were to be attended by all members of the village community (or at the very least a representative of each household) and sometimes the processions formed the occasion for decision-making (Todorović 2006). Since many Serbs identify strongly with pre-Christian rituals and beliefs, and these are very present especially in rural areas, it will be useful to include insights into the content and politics of pre-Christian symbolism in our analysis.

Approaching contemporary politicized prayer processions from a Christian perspective, one could argue that the Church is merely reordering the world in its own image of sacredness — but the incongruence between the accustomed

ritual symbolism of the processions and the present political demands is immediately striking. A parallel with the ritual practice of the Eucharist might be useful to illustrate the symbolic disparity that has in effect transpired here. The Serbian Orthodox Church believes in the 'Real Presence' and each Liturgy gathers the faithful who partake of the Eucharist. Communion also serves to unite the members of the Church into its body — the community of the faithful — who may intellectually disagree on certain issues of theology and politics, but are united in this communal rite. Moreover, this ritual practice in no way affects non-believers, who are free to interpret it quite differently — which they do. Taking part in the Eucharist, then, is not considered as a political act in the sense that participation would be considered as a sign of the participant's undivided support for all Church teachings. Community, not dogma, is central. In contrast with that, politicized prayer processions are much more politically charged and therefore disrupt both the community of the faithful and the lives of non-believers. Since taking part in prayer processions is considered as a display of personal agreement to the political ends of the procession, the faithful must self-exclude from the rite if they disagree with its political intent. For non-believers there is much less space for theological or political disagreement: they are not free to ignore the decidedly non-symbolic demands for legal changes. In prayer processions, then, theology, politics and community have become more intertwined than in the celebration of the Eucharist, and both participating in them as well as refraining from them is much more charged and regarded as a display of political (dis)agreement. Prayer processions do not accommodate the theological diversity that might be observed among those participating in the Eucharist. Communal prayers used for political ends also mark a boundary between opinions of individuals exerting a political influence of the Church as a hierarchical institution, on the one hand, and the political use of the ritual praxis of the Church as the community of the faithful, on the other. This new line crossed in 2014 is perhaps visible only to Church members, some of whom can no longer in good conscience attend all her services. In those cases where the Church service includes a prayer procession, members are requested to consciously make a decision on whether or not they agree with the political goals of the procession. These members are thus in effect unintentionally excommunicated along with the intentionally excommunicated Other in opposition to whom the procession is organized.

If, however, we approach the processions from a pre-Christian vantage point, we might accede that some interesting parallels exist. Pre-Christian processions were, as Todorović noted, often also an occasion for the community to make important decisions. However, these included the entire local

community, whereas the present processions make a point of excluding members whose behavior they seek to regulate, ignoring their potential contribution to the community. Moreover, while contemporary processions find their accumulation in praying before the Parliament, some forms of pre-Christian processions ritually included kneeling before sanctified oak trees. One could argue that while traditional processions moved to outside spaces they deemed sacred, contemporary processions could be interpreted as possibly worshipping or sanctifying secular institutions such as the state, the nation, or public space itself. One might be thankful, at least, that these prayer processions endorsed by the Church did not end in the contemporary variant of worshipping trees, which would probably have been genuflecting before the Parliament building.

Ironically, the parallels between the Church and LGBT communities mentioned above are continued in this vying for public space via Pride Parades and prayer processions. As has been noted, both homosexual citizens and members of the Serbian Orthodox Church have been historically persecuted; both the religious belief as well as (homo)sexual activity has at some point been directed to the private sphere. Church processions were, ironically, banned during Communism “for security reasons” (Todorović 2007) — the same reasons cited so often for the banning of Pride Parades. Jokes about Pride Parades as “gay processions” offer an illuminating illustration to some of the issues surrounding this battle for public space. Pride Parades have been likened to Ascension Day prayer processions traditionally held in Belgrade, as both represent an annually held walk through the city center in colorful robes — and accompanied by prominent politicians (Gay Serbia forum 2010).

Both the Church and LGBT activists appealed in 2014 to the power of the state and claimed the right to public space — but only the Serbian Orthodox Church strove to actively deny it to the other. Both could possibly justifiably be accused of capitulating to the state, though actual accusations have only been leveled at gay activists by other members of the LGBT community so far, as few within the Church would appear to desire that it remain aloof from the state.

The rift between the Church and LGBT communities — but also, symbolically, between what is perceived as ‘traditional’ Serbian and ‘liberal’ Western values — was arguably exacerbated by the 2014 battle for public space headed by the Church. The prayer processions in particular demonstrate an imagined community of the ‘pure’ in terms of religious nationalism. Defined by intentionally excluding the unruly Other (in legal and social, not only religious terms), this community is ironically *predicated* on excommunication. Exclusion as the defining trait of religio-sexual nationalism is thus paradoxically illustrated by the use of *communal* prayers. Focusing on ethnicity, proper gender roles, and



exclusion, the public discourse of the Church on the topic of gender minority issues in 2014 thus continues to be consistent with that of religio-sexual nationalism (Sremac & Ganzevoort, 2015).

One noticeable change in the Church's discourse on gender minority issues in 2014 is the increasing incursion of the sacral into the secular by way of two complementary strategies:

1. Stating secular aims and using a more secular (or at least monistic) discourse;
2. Using ritual prayers for political ends.

The politically motivated prayer processions are an especially egregious boundary transgression for secularists *within the Church*. It is one thing, arguably, to refuse to render unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's — by verbally opposing certain liberties the secular state has given her citizens — and entirely another matter — by using communal Church prayers for political purposes — to in effect render unto Caesar the things which be God's.

Another change noticeable in the discourse of the Serbian Orthodox Church over the course of time is consistent with the change perceived in the discourse of Serbian nationalism itself (Drezgić 2015; Veličković 2012): diminished explicit focus on ethnicity and increased focus on reconstructing 'traditional' gender roles. The Other itself changes — from the outside enemy of another ethnicity to the enemy within, the unruly 'them' preventing 'us' from being a great nation by refusing to perform their proper role in procreation and family life. Patriarchal gender roles which are seen as maximizing birth rates remain a consistent part of the Church discourse throughout recent history — placing it firmly within the framework of religio-sexual nationalism.

## 6 Conclusion

When compared to previous years, in the year 2014 the Serbian Orthodox Church seemed to attempt to push back the frontiers between the religious and the secular when issues of sexuality and gender are concerned. First, because the Church increasingly interfered not only with state policy (abortion) but also with popular culture (Conchita Wurst). Second, because its rhetoric itself became less theological and more secular, though traditional Orthodox imagery still forms an important part of the discourse. Moreover, it expanded its attempts to influence the Serbian public opinion on homosexuality not only by issuing public statements in written media, but also by organizing church

rituals (prayer processions) which physically claimed the streets of Belgrade for religion, heterosexuality, procreation and national identity. Our close reading of church discourse and strategy indicates that religio-sexual nationalism is a multi-layered phenomenon which takes place not only in spoken or written language, but also in rituals, symbols and images. Both levels, moreover, mutually reinforce one another: public prayer processions become a powerful ritual precisely *because* they are connected to a political message on sexuality and gender.

There are several discursive effects to be noted in the aftermath of the Church's campaign against Gay Pride in 2014. The first is that the "secular move" of the Serbian Orthodox Church probably addresses a wider audience than a strong theological discourse. In 2009, 16 % of the Serbs indicated that they visited a church service at least once a month, while a much larger proportion (35%) only attends at major church festivals (Naletova 2009, 387). One might wonder if a population whose regular religious activities such as church attendance are relatively low will agree with or even understand explicit theological or Biblical references. A move to secular argumentation will therefore more successfully connect to 'common knowledge' rather than (absent) religious knowledge. Second, a strong focus on popular culture firmly locates homosexuality outside the church. Opposed to one official church statement which addresses homosexuality directly and relatively mildly are various statements which contain clear condemnations of homosexuality, but these statements do not consider lesbians, gays, bisexuals or transgenders *within* the church: they address public expressions of homosexuality, rendering homosexuality a social problem rather than (for instance) a pastoral issue or church political challenge. The firm action against the public display of homosexuality seems to release the Church of its responsibility to address the issues of LGBT-members. Third, by introducing ideologically charged rituals such as the prayer procession directly after the Pride parade, the Church increasingly makes an appeal to citizens to endorse a political religion in which the "right" attitude to sexuality, gender and national identity becomes a prerequisite for religious participation. These public rituals (in Serbia very popular) reduce the space for an individual, more liberal stance on sexuality and gender, a "liberty of conscience" that hitherto was granted to participants of the Eucharist. Church members, moreover, are not only asked to agree with church teachings on an intellectual level, but (by partaking in prayer procession) to use their bodies as a physical affirmation thereof.

The strong connection of religious participation, nationalist discourse and a conservative stance on sexuality and gender in Serbian Orthodox rhetoric might be one of the explanatory factors of the reluctance of LGBT-activists

to openly or directly criticize the church. Such a strong opposition, of course, would soon be removed from a discussion on theology or social acceptance and be directed toward issues of national identity and religious and national belonging. In order to be able to lay a claim on part of the public opinion and some of the public space, LGBT-activists cannot afford to have their national loyalty questioned — and in Serbia, it has hopefully become clear, this loyalty is strongly connected to citizens' attitude to Orthodoxy.

At the same time, the Church's strong opposition and strategic move to secular discourse and claims to the public space may be read as an affirmation of the success of the LGBT-movement. If the Church found it necessary to "purge" the street with a prayer procession after the Pride Parade, it must have felt that something "real" had in fact happened to those streets. It is precisely the cleverly organized religious opposition, then, which emphasizes the success of queering the streets of Belgrade in 2014.

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